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First-Ever Permit Hunt Set For Rio Grande Turkeys

BY TERRY RUDNICK

Turkey hunters this spring will have their first-ever opportunity to hunt Rio Grande turkeys in the Evergreen State. At least, hunters fortunate enough to be drawn for one of the 300 special turkey permits for three central Washington spring turkey areas will have that opportunity.

The Rio Grande, a wild turkey subspecies native to the arid Southwest, is a newcomer to the state of Washington, having been introduced only four years ago by the Department of Wildlife. The first 22 of them, from Oklahoma, were released in the Wenas country near the Yakima-Kittitas county border in the spring of 1984. Twenty-eight more from Texas were released in the same area in 1985 and 1986. During those years, the department released an additional 55 Rio Grandes in the Colockum area of eastern Kittitas County. Those 115 birds and their offspring have thrived and expanded their range, providing healthy turkey populations and a huntable excess of toms in only four years.

Merriam's Subspecies

The rapid growth of the Rio Grande turkey population in central Washington isn't the state's only success story involving wild turkeys. The Merriam's subspecies has thrived in the south-central and northeastern portion of the state for sever-

al years, and, like the Rio Grande, the Merriam's was introduced by the Department of Wildlife.

The first Merriam's, a dozen of them from New Mexico, were released on the department's Klickitat Wildlife Area in February of 1960, followed by releases in Stevens County and other areas. The Klickitat and Stevens County releases proved successful, providing the nucleus for what would turn out to be the state's largest turkey populations to date. Subsequent efforts over the next 10 years to establish the Merriam's subspecies in nearly two dozen other locations throughout the state were unsuccessful, due in part to the fact that very small numbers of birds were released, most of them from game-farm stocks.

Washington's first wild turkey season opened in Stevens County in 1965. That first hunt, during the fall, was followed a year later by a fall season in Klickitat County. By the mid-1970s, the state Merriam's turkey population had grown to about 2,000 birds, with populations well-established throughout south-central and northeastern Washington, and there were over 1,000 hunters pursuing them each year during both spring and fall seasons.

While the Merriam's subspecies has done well and drawn a great deal of interest from hunters in Washington, much of the state's varied habitat isn't suitable to Merriam's. A num-

ber of state wildlife agencies in other parts of the country have had good luck in introducing other turkey subspecies to new areas, and a few years ago Department of Wildlife Upland Game Bird Program Manager Dan Blatt began to look around to see if he might be able to find birds that could be successfully introduced into various parts of the state that weren't suited to Merriam's.

Rio Grande Subspecies

The dry hills and brushy gulches of the eastern Cascades in central Washington are much like the traditional haunts of the Rio Grande wild turkey, and in the spring of 1984, the department made an arrangement with the state of Oklahoma to bring 22 Rio Grandes to Washington. Those birds, 17 hens and five toms, were released in the Wenas Valley between Ellensburg and Yakima. The next spring, 14 more Rio Grandes—these from Texas—were added to the Wenas turkey population. Two-dozen more Texas Rio Grandes were released in 1986, bringing the total to 60.

Rio Grande turkeys from Texas were also introduced in the Colockum in 1985 and 1986, and, like those in the Wenas, they have thrived and expanded their range. Healthy turkey populations, with an excess of gobblers to provide limited hunting opportunity, have devel-

oped in only four years in areas where wild turkeys never before existed.

That's why the Washington Wildlife Commission earlier this year adopted a Department of Wildlife proposal for a permit turkey season in the Rio Grande's new haunt in central Washington. About 300 hunters who applied for the special permits last month and were lucky enough to have their applications drawn in early April will be taking to the hills on April 20 in search of their first-ever opportunity to bag a Washington Rio Grande turkey. Those 300 permits are divided between three areas. Turkey Unit 1 (Colockum) has 150 permits, while units 2 (Wenas) and 3 (Manastash/Taneum), have 75 permits each. A map showing the three turkey areas is shown on page three of the 1988 Spring Turkey Seasons pamphlet, so that hunters can be sure exactly where they may and may not hunt with their particular permit. The April 20-May 11 permit season runs the same dates as the regular season in Stevens, Klickitat and Skamania counties, where permits are not required. Both the regular and permit-only turkey areas are open to the taking of gobblers and turkeys with visible beards only.

The growth of the Rio Grande turkey population isn't likely to stop in the three areas open to hunting this spring. Earlier this year the WDW brought in 197 more Rios from

Texas, and they were released into suitable habitat in Okanogan, Asotin, Stevens, Klickitat and Yakima counties. Depending on the success of these transplants, the state's Rio Grande turkey population could take a dramatic upward turn within the next year or two.

The state's Merriam's turkey population also got a significant boost earlier this year. Upland Game Bird Manager Dan Blatt has brought in 163 of them from the Black Hills of South Dakota, and they were released in Klickitat and Stevens counties to mix with and add new blood to those "traditional" turkey areas of the state.

Eastern Subspecies

And, just in case two subspe-

cies of wild turkey aren't enough for the state's hunters and other wildlife enthusiasts, Blatt is currently involved in establishing a third strain. He released 18 Eastern wild turkeys in Lewis County last spring and nine more last month. Last year's birds have already begun producing young, and Blatt is optimistic that western Washington will soon have its own thriving wild turkey population.

One of these days it might almost get to the point where you can't go for a casual walk in the woods anywhere in Washington without running into a flock of wild turkeys. No one seems to be complaining about that possibility. ww

Below: This year's hunt of Rio Grande birds marks four years of population growth and range expansion. WASHINGTON DEPARTMENT OF WILDLIFE



